

The one-to-five-day workshop scam

Why you can't learn everything you need to know in a one or two day workshop

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It sounds so appealing – “Learn everything you need to know about (you fill in the topic) in our powerful three-day workshop.” We all wish it would be true, and so we all have many opportunities to spend money on that wish. But what do you really get when you spend that money? A drink of water out of a fire hose is the answer.

Now, it is true that you might gain more than just that drink of water. You might benefit from the networking opportunity, and you might enjoy having the workshop in some exotic location – but to think that you are going to come out of the experience with in-depth knowledge is pure delusion. Probably the most learning you can expect from such an experience is a good set of references on the topic along with examples of the possibilities.

All of this is particularly true when it comes to getting up to speed on a computer software package or language. In this case, it takes more than just listening. The learning has to be put into practice for it to take hold, and, one of the best ways that this happens is on a real-life project.

Learning a foreign language provides good example of what works. Almost everybody knows the best way to do that is to spend time in a place where everybody is speaking that language. Each day you pick up a few more words. The key elements are immersion and repetition.

I speak here on the basis of 15 years of classroom teaching in the public schools, mostly on the junior high level – and then moving into the adult learning environment during the 1980s, when computers were becoming a part of the work environment.

Early on in my teaching experience I learned that one size does *not* fit all. After 10 years of traditional classroom teaching, I became very dissatisfied with the effectiveness of that mode and set out to redesign my classroom to better meet the needs of individual students. In order to achieve that result, I had to revamp my classroom environment and revise my role in the classroom.

A fellow teacher and I teamed up and took doing this on as a two-year project. In a nutshell, we put the responsibility for learning and meeting certain grade criteria on the shoulders of our students. Our role became that of collaborator to the student rather than dispenser of knowledge.

The results were such that I have absolutely no desire to return to the traditional classroom. The fact that we had 7th and 8th grade boys and girls acting in a mature, adult mode in our classroom made quite an impression on me.

When I moved from junior high into the business world I saw situations in which adults were acting in the same mode that I had seen with my junior high students in the traditional classroom. This pointed up to me that the environment is a very powerful element in both the learning and work place.

So, what is a better way than the one-to-five-day workshop? What is needed is a guide by the side, not a sage on the stage. The guide by the side becomes a mentor or coach for the learners as they develop their skill set. A project becomes the learning vehicle.

In working with adults on improving their computer skills, I have found the most effective mode is to have well-defined goals, combined with meaningful work to be done. Repetition over multiple sessions is critical. Repetition during a session is effective only with short-term memory. Development of long-term memory requires that there be time between sessions.

Working one-on-one (the most practical mode I have found in the fast-moving world of computers) I have been able to develop working computer competency (for a trainee with a well-defined purpose) in three days -- meeting twice a day. On the other hand, it took me several months to get a retired Harvard professor up to speed with his e-mail skills – because he could only meet every three weeks due to his extensive travel schedule as a consultant.

Note from the above examples that the time between sessions becomes a critical component in retaining the material covered. A minimum amount of time between sessions is two or three hours. However, one session a day for a week would work very well. If the sessions are going to be a week apart, some practice or ‘homework’ between sessions is needed to maintain continuity. Sessions spaced over a week apart will require more overall training time for the material to be retained.

My model for computer learning for a group is suggested in an example below

Develop an Access database as you learn

1. Instructor meets with 1 to 6 individuals for an introductory session on choosing an Access project, assessing current skill level, and getting started with table-design concepts
2. Instructor follows up with individual meetings with each student to identify a suitable project (or subset of a project) to be used as the learning vehicle – and to help get the student going on the project
3. Five subsequent weekly group meetings would include sessions focusing on table structure, form (screen) development, and query and report development as they relate to student projects
4. Provision is made for support of students as they bump their heads against development problems. (Two hours of phone or e-mail support extended out over a 6-month month period)

Cost for this kind of a program would not be much more than sending six people to a \$1,500 seminar – part of which can be accounted for as meaningful work on a business related project.

And, by the way, the one-day workshop is not as bad as multiple days. At least you will spend only that one day getting your drink of water.